

INT: Do you think America's attitude towards the Vietnam war changed markedly during the '80's?

DE: Well, of course, there's not just one attitude toward the war and it has never been in America. I don't think attitudes have changed toward the war significantly. And the evidence that I would cite for that is the resistance there has been in the mass of the public toward having a second Vietnam come about by intervention in Central America either El Salvador or Nicaragua. If the attitudes of the mass of people were really much different from what they were in the late '60's and early '70's, over 15 years ago, I think we would have had combat troops fighting in Central America, sent there by President Reagan, as I think Reagan wanted. The impression that there's been a change may reflect the fact that the occupant of the White House, President Reagan in the '80's has held a view very different from that of the mass of the country when the war ended or during the end of the war. But his attitude hasn't changed. And that's not why he was

elected. I almost have a feeling that your question reflects a sense, by somebody, that President Reagan was successful in shifting the attitude of the American people toward his own, that is toward a feeling that the war had been a noble cause, that we were right to intervene, that we could have won and that we should have won. And that the failure to win represented a failure of the successive Administrations that fought the war and that these were mistakes that could be corrected in some future intervention. These are beliefs that President Reagan and some of his associates held right through the war and after it. And I think he did a lot to sell those opinions, to try and sell them to the American public. And so, of course, one heard much more of them, coming from the White House than one had heard over the previous ten years. But I think he was, almost entirely unsuccessful in convincing anyone of that. So, although those opinions got a much wider airing because of their source, in the White House, than they ever had before, I don't think that they really changed anyone's opinion. In fact, can I ask

you, does this question being asked now, what beginning attitude does it reflect? It's a surprising question in a way.

INT: Well, you know, in fact, when you were mentioning how you viewed the question, I had viewed it in the opposite way. Just personally, I had thought that the war was seen as more of a defeat now than it was, let's say 10 or 15 years ago. But, as with any question, it's up to the participation(?). It can be seen either way.

DE: Can I ask how old you are.

INT: Sure, I'm 25.

DE: Okay, that's very interesting. Because, of course, you were 11 when the war ended, right?

INT: Right.

DE: And when American combat forces got out of the ground involvement, you were 9. So you don't have, I take it, a very personal

memory of any of those event. Right?

INT: No.

DE: The reason I ask is, I would expect, I don't know what I would expect really of someone your age on that point. But, I'd be very surprised if someone my age or ten years younger, held the view that you did. Have you really gotten that view from people you've asked? Or, have you asked many people yet?

INT: This question?

DE: Yeah.

INT: No, no I haven't.

DE: Let me say to you then, my own perception, which I'm pretty confident of on this particular point. The war could not have been seen as more of a defeat when you were 11 years-old in 1975. Few countries have seen their policy collapse in such a humiliating way as the spectacle of Americans

fighting off their allies who are trying to fight their way on to our helicopters to get on to our carriers. And the idea of people clinging to the rails of the helicopters as they're trying to get out and the Viet Cong marching into Saigon. It was a very striking defeat. There was really nobody who saw it otherwise at the time. So, it couldn't be that people had come to see it now as being more of a defeat. I'm interested that you had that perception but I think you're just reflecting the fact that they do see it that way now. And, I take it, you must have assumed, maybe you assumed for some reason that that wasn't so obvious then. But that's not a change at all. I think you're perceiving that they do still see it in the way that they did 15 years ago, which was, that it was a great failure. There's less discussion of the question now of course. Should we have gone in? Was it right or wrong? Could it have been won and so forth. Because, again, at that time for people who were then the age you are now, the war was an obsession, a preoccupation in our society. And of course that is actually a change. I

might have said, by the way, that one difference in public attitudes is that, of course, with all the time that's left, there is a whole generation of people who have no longer any real personal memory at all of the war. And of course, for many other people, memories have faded somewhat. What's striking to me is that despite that the mass of opinion has not changed. If Reagan has found some responsive cord in the public for his view that we could have won. The poll evidence and other evidence is that it's precisely in the especially young males, not females so much, who are 17 and 18, sort of draft age now, though there is no more draft, who, really did not experience the war at all directly and who simply find it terribly overwhelmingly plausible when they hear the President imply that we could have won. That, after all, is so, it's very hard to believe otherwise unless you happened to live through it whether here at home or in Vietnam. But, otherwise, you say, how could it not have been winnable by the United States of America. It must have been. So, you look at Rambo, if you're that age or younger and

you hear Rambo say, are you going to let us win it this time? Implying that we weren't allowed to win last time. That is the Reagan message. And I don't blame kids at all for believing that that must reflect some reality. It must have been possible to beat this little people in black shorts and rubber sandals if we really tried. But the people who were a little older at that time and who lived through it did come to understand quite overwhelmingly what somehow Reagan never did, that we were not able to win, any more than the Soviet Union was able to win in Afghanistan. And after all, that's equally paradoxical. Must have been just as surprising to a lot of Russians, that they weren't able to win. But they've had the experience and they have gotten the message and they have now responded to that message. That's one of the things, I think, by the way, that has kept the lesson fresh, among others. The spectacle of another super power doing the same brutal murderous things in Afghanistan that we did in Vietnam and being just as unsuccessful in suppressing nationalism in that country and in managing

to create the peace of a peaceful occupation has reminded people of the experience. And again, the mass of the American people, I think, from the beginning has seen Afghanistan in terms of Vietnam. Something that the Administration always denied. So, again, there's not a real evolution of opinion on that. You have the Administration saying that Nicaragua is not like Vietnam and Afghanistan is not like Vietnam. And the public correctly seen throughout, Nicaragua is potential Vietnam if we put troops in there. And Afghanistan is an actual Vietnam, the Soviets having put troops. The public is quite right on this. I don't see that opinions on that aspect of the war have really changed.

I think, by the way, there's a handful of people who were anti-war at the time who have come to see, in the establishment basically, in high level media and politics who have now come around. Really, I have run into a handful of individuals who now feel we were on the wrong side, rather, the government was on the right side, they were wrong to fight against the war and criticize it. But as I

look at these people, I see them just as a part of a very general right shift in the society of the establishment which goes along with the fact of Reagan having been in power all this time and all the prerequisites(?) and the audience and the prestige and the money all being on the side of such attitudes. But I think that's limited to just a few, essentially very opportunistic people.

INT: I might say I think it was last night or the night before, watching this Tour of Duty series, which my little boy is watching. He's 12. And I might say, I don't mind his watching because I think the picture that it gives of the war is really quite fair. I've only seen it two or three times. But it's picture, the criticism of the war, the anti-war movement and the doubts among the troops and the problems of combat and so forth are pretty fair. I thought, of course, Platoon was an extremely realistic movie in its war. Like I said, that's the one I've seen. It's very realistic. It's a kind of a credit to our country that we're able to look at it

that clearly. Again, I don't see that's a real change. Now, where attitudes have changed is toward the veterans. And there, and some people may think of attitudes toward the war as being almost the same as attitudes toward the veterans. I wouldn't agree with that. But there, there has been quite a change. And, of course, there has been a much greater acceptance of the veterans. They were very unfairly identified with the sense of failure and with the atrocities of the war, which some of them certainly did commit, but under orders on the whole or under great combat pressure. And it was certainly very unfair to hold them responsible as opposed to their bosses for the war. And they were treated as if they were largely responsible. Well, things like the Vietnam Memorial and maybe even the movie Platoon and other things and the passage of time have led to, I think they're being, this unfair attitude of denial of their role, ... trying to ignore their _____, has changed. I think it's no longer the case that veterans are held sort of responsible as symbol of our failure and symbol of our

crimes in the way that they were unfairly held before. So that's a change for the good. Although what hasn't changed as much as it should is their actual material treatment. They should have gotten much better benefits, I think, for the sacrifice that they made in going to Vietnam in terms of medical treatment and of course the Agent Orange matter has been a disgrace. Even though they're getting some benefit of that finally. But, on the whole, we should, right now, be expending a lot, much more on the rehabilitation of veterans, especially as it's becoming clear that the scars, the psychological scars of combat have been much more lasting than people expected.

INT: How did any changes affect the way people treated you personally insofar as you were identified with the war?

DE: Well, remember I was identified with the war with the prosecution of the war at first. I worked for the State Department. I was in Vietnam for two years. And then with the anti-war movement for which I worked for

seven or eight years after that, till the war ended. And I'm more known publicly, of course, for the anti-war work. Since, as I say, I don't think the attitudes about the war have changed very much. I haven't really experienced much change in public attitudes toward me on that issue. I do a lot of lecturing and have found largely on the nuclear arms race, I haven't chosen to talk on Vietnam throughout that period very much especially say around 1980 or so or the early '80's. One change is that there is, in the last few years, there's much more demand now for me to speak about about Vietnam. From my own choice, I say, is this _____ about either Nicaragua intervention or the nuclear arms race. But often now, students and faculty have asked me to address lessons of Vietnam and comparisons between then and now. I think there is a growing interest now in learning about the war, obviously from the young people in colleges who really have no direct memory of it and are very curious about it, properly anxious to learn about it. So, if anything, there's been an increasing, in the last few years, has been a definite

trend toward wanting to know about the war and the ethical issues that are raised and the lessons for the future in a very good way. It's been very positive changes as far as I _____. And I would say that my own role, people that come to me and the attitude of the media and so forth has been very respectful and appreciative. So, I haven't certainly had any problem.

INT: How did your own attitudes change, if at all? Do you now perceive the war as more or less a defeat, actually they use the word victory, source of change, that you did see ten years ago?

DE: Well, as I've said, it could hardly have been different in scale. It was not World War II. It could hardly have been more of a defeat for United States policy then. My sense of that has not changed. I wouldn't say really any of my attitudes have changed over that period. The very poor performance of the Vietnamese government was not a surprise to me. I never had any admiration for the policies, the ideology of the Viet

Cong or the Hanoi Regime and didn't expect a very liberal or even a good government from them in any particular way. I certainly, like everybody in Vietnam, respected them as fighters and as nationalists, as patriots, you know, fighting for their cause. But that is not a guarantee of a humane or a competent government. So the evidence that they have not been a good government for their people is not a surprise for me. I wish better for the people of Vietnam. And I'm glad to see like Marxist leaders elsewhere, they are really coming to admit their own shortcomings in the last few years. And I'm hopeful that that will lead to better government in the future. The more they imitate the Soviets in the policy of openness, which is beginning in Vietnam. I think there is an overlap here with your last question, your fourth question you mentioned, which was what?

INT: The fourth question was, how, if at all, do you think attitudes towards the war will change _____?

DE: I was going to say, one thing that has

disappointed me throughout and I hope will change. I hope will change. I'm working to change it. Is, that there has never been.... two things. There really has never been great interest in the media or anybody else as to what Nixon's real policy was. During a long period, he's still perceived, I would say, quite incorrectly, as mainly trying to get out of Vietnam or getting out of Vietnam. And of course that was the whole period that I was working in the anti-war movement and my obsession then, which I have, more and more come to realize was correct. Was, that, far from trying to get us out of Vietnam, he was trying to win the war, really by standard bombing program and threats of escalation. He was defeated in that. But, I think the risk of great escalation was much greater than the public realized. And thus, they've never come to realize how effectively the anti-war movement put a ceiling on his ability to expand the war, which I think he was very anxious to do. It's a very important point because I think the same has been true in the last eight years as was true under Nixon. I think we had a President who

was actually inclined and threatening and preparing to expand a war, secretly preparing to expand a war very greatly. And that it was the prospect of strong resistance to that by the mass of the people, to some degree, and by a lot of activists in a very militant manner that kept him from doing that. So I think that the experience shows very great power of the kind we're seeing in Russia and in particular in China this week. In other words, people power. We saw in the Philippines where even a very centralized government, _____ government, has to bend to the will of people who have taken to the streets and are demonstrating and who are risking their lives in some cases.

[LONG PAUSE].

DE: ... I think, there's been no mention of this, but let me make a guess right here. I know that what's happening on the one hand in China today would delight friends of mine like Abbey Hoffman, for instance. And I'm really sorry that he's not alive to see this. But, I suspect that there are people in

China, obviously many of the students are very young, perhaps too young for this, but many of the people in the population who are supporting the students, I suspect, find, perhaps more inspiration from the example of the American anti-war movement than we may do in this country ourselves. They may find that more relevant and inspiring. I know that the anti-nuclear movement in Europe in the early '80's felt a direct kinship to the American anti-war movement. The people here who had resisted the draft and who had demonstrated and gone to prison and done civil disobedience. And in turn, of course, those demonstrations in Europe in the early '80's, had, I think, a direct influence on the negotiating that's going on right now and on the INF Treaty, on getting nuclear weapons out of Europe. The point here is that, I think that we have really never learned as a society, we learned that the war was bad, was wrong and ought to end. I don't think that even the people who were active in the anti-war movement were left with the lesson that they should have learned of how much power they really had exerted over policy. And in

part that was because the war did go on so long despite their efforts. They felt powerless and they were told they were powerless and were having no affect. I believe the reality was, which is still to a large extent unknown, and I've spent my time trying to teach this to people and put the word out, but I wouldn't say with very widespread success, what they haven't learned is that Nixon was prepared to make that war much bigger and earlier bigger than it became. And that the invasion of North Vietnam was a real possibility early in his term and even the use of nuclear weapons which were threatened was a possibility early in the term, which was prevented essentially, in the same way that his invasion of Cambodia was ended and that was by a really very widespread popular movement of resistance. One other lesson, by the way, that I drew from the war, which I'm hoping will be followed more in the future, was that the war was actually ended in an unprecedented way, by Congress, under pressure from the public, cutting off the funding for the war. That was a precedent of Congressional action in

response to public desire, binding up the Executive Branch, which I have hoped for the last 15 years to see imitated with respect to the arms race. I know this article will be coming out in the fall, we'll know more by then. I think it really has been popular pressure that has caused Bush to be as responsive as he has just been in the summit, in the NATO summit this week, to Gorbachev's overtures about negotiations in Europe, but, I have thought for a long time that what we needed to see here was public pressure on Congress to hold down and end the spending for the arms race. That has actually worked, for example, with anti-satellite testing. Congress cut off the money for that unless the Soviets were also testing. And, as a result, there's been no anti-satellite testing since '83, which is a very big achievement. And I think, by the way, a direct lesson that they've learned from the war. So, again, repeat for me that fourth question. I think I've only partly addressed it.

INT: How, if at all, do you think attitudes

towards the war will change in the future?

DE: Well, to sum up what I've just been saying. I hope that people will get increasingly conscious of the positive lessons that can be drawn of the way the war was ended by a great variety of forms of public resistance to the policy of the kind we're seeing in China right now and appreciation of that kind of people's power. Specifically the ability of Congress to cut off money. Another lesson that I would like to see more drawn than has been is the fact that Vietnam was not really an aberrant part of our policy. It was a very typical policy, what really made it look different was the scale of resistance that the Viet Cong or the Vietnamese people gave to our intervention which led us to put troops in and bomb on a great scale and so forth. But our determination to control their country was not at all unusual. We had that tendency very often in other parts of the world. I didn't appreciate that, I would say, during the war as much as I came to do later. But I will say, give the American people credit,

they were able to smell the same sentiments at work in Central America. And I hope they will be as leery of that kind of domination and willingness to intervene in the Philippines as they have been in Central America and elsewhere. Otherwise I think we could very well find ourselves replaying Vietnam in the Philippines. As, after all, we once did at the start of the century. So, I wonder how, you know, you're 25 but even if you were 50, I could ask the same question, I wonder how conscious you are of the scale of our counterinsurgency campaign in the Philippines at the end of the century and the beginning of this one. Do you know much about it?

INT: No.

DE: What would you guess was a good estimate of the number of Filipinos we killed at that time in the process of pacifying them? Just make a guess. Let me give you a scale factor. You know how many Americans died in Vietnam? I'll give a scale in comparison.

INT: No, I don't know.

DE: Make a guess then.

INT: I'll guess 250 thousand.

DE: Died, American?

INT: Yeah. Am I way off?

DE: Well, you're off by five times exactly. They usually give a figure about 30 thousand combat casualties but about 55 thousand, since a lot died of sickness and what not in Vietnam, about 55 thousand over the ten years, the last ten years of the war. We killed a minimum of 250 thousand Filipinos, mostly civilians, largely women and children. The estimates go from 250 thousand to a million, in the Philippines around 1900. That's, by the way, about how many Americans died in World War II, a little less. So that was no small war. That was the precursor of Vietnam. Well the point is, Vietnam was a very similar operation, as was Afghanistan for the Russians. And we are capable of

doing that. Now, the other side is, I don't think our establishment as a whole _____ lesson as nearly as clearly. And above all, the right wing Republicans represented by Reagan Administration did not learn the same lessons as the American public. I think they are thoroughly capable on their own if we did not resist of getting us into another Vietnam in Philippines or Central America. And that's not because, in fact Reagan was willing to do it in Lebanon. But, again, the American public went against that, pulled them out, got him to pull them out in 1983. So, this tendency to intervention is certainly greater in the '80's than it was in the late '70's. And that might suggest a change. But the change is really in who is in power and it's not a change in public attitudes and thank God because since the public attitudes have not changed, even a relatively popular President, Reagan was not able to pull the country into full combat involvement in those areas. And, I think, by the way, that it will get increasingly hard to do it as we change our attitudes toward the Soviet Union and as the Soviet Union

itself changes. It will get much harder to rationalize interventions in the Third World on the grounds that it's really a struggle with a very powerful, highly developed enemy, the Soviet Union. That was always false. It was false in Korea. It was false in Vietnam and elsewhere in the Central America where we've intervened. But I think the falsehood now is getting much harder to be convincing to people. And in the future, when we face some poor peasant country that we want to dominate, it will be very much harder to convince the American public than in the past that this is just a proxy fight with a very dangerous enemy and it's really just a safer way of fighting World War II. That's the way we sort of sold Vietnam, that we're really fighting a Nazi-like, powerful enemy, our real opponent is not those desperately poor, Third World people that we seem to be fighting and killing. And I think without that cloak, that cold war ideology of the dangerous Nazi-like Soviets that we're facing, that it will be easier for the public to resist an executive that tries to get us into war. Am I the first person you've asked

these questions?

INT: Yes.

DE: You're going to ask a number of other people?

INT: Actually I'm just handling people in the San Francisco area.

DE: Who else are you going to talk to?

INT: The only other person is Joan Baez. Now, with these quotes, what I will do is I send them in as you spoke them. They will be cut. I just have to tell you that right out only because that's the type of magazine that we are and the amount of space.

DE: That goes without saying.

INT: What I will do is, when it comes time for us to do the fact checking on this, which I don't know when that will occur. Usually right before it comes out, late summer. Then we can go over this again or I can make sure

I have it down ____>

DE: I think you'd ask whether there were any incidence that I'd experienced as a result of changes in the last ten years. It is true, that a handful of people, most of whom were always supportive of the war, when the Hanoi Regime, when the current Vietnamese Regime would be found doing some new oppression leading to a new flood of boat people or something like that, there would be individuals, especially in the media, who would challenge me and say, doesn't that lead you to, I would have the experience of having somebody question, challenge me and saying, doesn't this tell you that you were wrong to oppose the war? My answer always has been, without changing my attitude on that, that, first, I don't believe the Vietnamese people would ever have been better off if were still bombing them. And that's really the only alternative that any Administration ever offered, policy they actually followed of getting the troops out, cutting off of the money. The real alternative we had was not to win either cheaply or expensively or short

or long. That was not an alternative open to us. Rambo was wrong on that point and so was Oliver North. Both of them were looking at this war at a level that, well, of course Stallone was watching it from a girl's school in Switzerland so he wasn't a good vantage point, it would seem. Did you know that?

INT: Did I know what?

DE: Where Stallone was during the war?

INT: No, I didn't know that.

DE: He did.

INT: I didn't know.

DE: He avoided the draft by teaching physical education in a girl's school in Switzerland, outside the country. So, it's a kind of distant vantage point. North of course was in Vietnam. But, you know, he was very young and it was very hard for him to believe that the United States really could not win if they really set themselves to do

it. But he was wrong about that. Winning was not one of our options. It was not, period. And what we could have done was to keep bombing. And we could still be bombing from aircraft carriers even if we had no foothold in Vietnam. I don't think that would make the human rights situation better in Vietnam or the welfare of the people in Vietnam any better. So, almost nothing the Vietnamese government has done, nothing that was done, suggests that we should have simply continued the war indefinitely. The other side of that was that nothing that happened in Vietnam ever, while we were there or since we left, gave us the right to kill any Vietnamese. We never had the right to do that. None of the reasons we gave for doing that came close to being a valid justification for the killing that we were doing. It was right for us to stop and we should have stopped before we began or much earlier than we did. That's been my feeling, this occasional experience I've had when people raise that question. Okay, does that cover it?

INT: I think so. There's nothing else you'd like to add? Thank you for giving me so much of your time. What I'll do then is I'll be just compiling different sorts of things I'm doing for this project around June 7th. It's due on the 8th. And then if I have any last minute questions, could I call you o the 7th?

DE: Sure, anytime. The 7th of what?

INT: June.

DE: Yeah.

INT: Okay, ____ be back. Well thanks a lot. I appreciate it and it was very interesting to talk to you. Thank you.

DE: Okay and say hello to Joan Baez for me. You know it was Joan Baez did not particularly affect my opinions on the war, as it happened. They changed while I was in Vietnam and after I got back. But she had a big influence on me on what the question to do about it. And really it was hearing and reading her things that she had written and

going to a seminar at an institute that she started for the study of non-violence in Palo Alto that had a very significant influence on me and readings that I got from those people to converting me really to a Ghandian point of view and the influence of Martin Luther King and others. So, I always felt a great debt to her. I think a lot of people, including myself, in this country were very inspired by Joan and the position she took, not only against the war, but her position for non-violence and non-violent militant action, which she has used so well ever since on human rights issues. And I've tried to use the same approach concentrating on anti, intervention and nuclear war issues. But I totally respect her work on human rights issues. She's been totally consistent on that right along. So, although I haven't seen much of her in recent years, she is a very inspiring American and I can almost sum up what I've been saying that my attitude toward her work and her position at the time on the war has certainly not changed. And I think America owes her a great debt.

INT: I think you're both inspiring people.

Thanks a lot Mr. Ellsberg. Okay, by-by.

[PAUSE].

DE: I think you'll see this is not only, it's quite relevant to some of the things we did discuss but I suspect very much in the spirit of the kinds of questions that people interested in. You were saying, how have attitudes changed or not changed and how did I hope they might change for the future. It occurs to me that one of the changes that have not occurred and that I think should occur is America's perception of a group of people. As I said, I think it's very healthy and overdo that we, as a society, have reassessed the guilt or the responsibility of the veterans and we've come to take them back, you know, into the heart of society without the criticism that they really didn't deserve as a group and integrated them in. Where that has not happened in the public perception of the anti-war movement as a whole, which tends still, I would say, to be reported in a very superficial and dismissive

way as a group of young people who are just acting out their adolescent whims of some sort. And I did mention that we haven't fully appreciated the power which is, in a way, the most important thing to realize about them. They haven't got the kind of credit either for their intentions or their achievements or for their patriotism that they really deserved. The comparison that I see today with the uprising in China is very interesting to anyone who lived through the '60's and early '70's here. By the way, just one thing worth mentioning is that, so often that anti-war movement is talked of as a '60's phenomenon. You know I really didn't come into it till '69 and my experience with the anti-war movement was the next six years and that was into the mid-70's. So it was much a much more persistent thing than people give it credit for. And as I say very powerful. But, it's very interesting to notice, by the way, one of the major demands of the student movement in China and that was they demanded to be seen with all their criticism as a patriotic movement. Have you noticed that? I don't know if you followed

it that closely. But that is one of their main demands was that they not be called traitors, as some of the leaders were doing, but that they be recognized as a patriotic movement. And in a way that has been won in the midst of what seems like a coming crackdown. Likewise, the student movement, which is largely what it was and the anti-war movement as a whole, deserved then and now to be seen as people who loved this country at least as much as the people who were blindly and uncritically obeying the demands of the authorities. And, certainly some of them, in the course of that decade, I think, fell out of love with this country. Even so, it was the frustration of a disappointed lover because they virtually all started with very high ideals for America and essentially what they wanted America to be and their criticism came out of that. A very concrete thought here is, I really do look forward to the day when there will be a memorial to the anti-war movement as there is, very properly, to the veterans. And there would be a lot of names to put on that if they put names on it. But names are not the important thing but a

recognition of the patriotism and the spirit of those people because, you know, quite aside from their, the reason I would like that recognition to come about is not by the way at all that I've suffered from any lack of that, if anything, there's among people who are against the war, which is the majority of the American people, there's been if anything a disproportionate recognition of my role and the fact is that Nixon by, you know, putting me on trial for 115 years, as a possible sentence and by the things he...

[END OF TAPE 3].